

Partisan Media as a Bridge between Elite Cues and Public Attitude:  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Korea

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Abstract

Levels of public polarization in evaluations of government responses to COVID-19 and perceptions of COVID-19 severity exhibit varying degrees across countries worldwide. This study aims to examine whether these disparities can be attributed to variations in elite messaging concerning COVID-19, as conveyed through the media. Through text mining of South Korean newspapers, we observe a convergence of media and elite discourse on the gravity of COVID-19 while divergent viewpoints emerge regarding government performance. In this scenario, we would expect that public opinion did so as well. Our findings suggest that the degree of polarization in public attitudes toward COVID-19 is largely contingent upon the extent to which the pandemic is partisan-framed by political elites and subsequently communicated to the populace through media channels.

**Keywords**

Retrospective Voting, Partisanship, COVID-19, Voter Perception, Partisan Media, South Korea

## 1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health officials' ability to fight the disease was often hampered by partisan polarization on whether the disease was a threat. Publics in many countries are polarized along party lines in both their evaluations of government responses to COVID-19 and also their perceptions of COVID-19's seriousness (Allcott et al. 2020; Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Aruguete et al. 2021; Camobreco and He 2022; Druckman et al. 2021; Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2021; VanDusky-Allen, Utych, and Catalano 2021; Vlandas and Klymak 2021). These differences in polarization generated higher levels of death among groups that felt the disease was less serious (e.g. Chen and Karim 2022; Sehgal et al. 2022), and deaths tended to be higher in polarized regions (Charron et al. 2022).

The goal of this paper is to look at the conditions that allowed these patterns to occur by looking at a place where they did not. In particular, I argue that a necessary precondition to mass polarization over COVID-19's seriousness was elite polarization. Specifically, polarization tended to occur in states where leaders who were wary of being blamed or who wanted to avoid closing the economy had incentives to deny that COVID-19 was a threat. If leaders had not done this, then I argue that public polarization on this issue would have been reduced.

To make this argument, I focus on a country where leaders did not diverge in their public messaging over COVID-19: South Korea. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred as the country began preparations for the 2020 legislative elections, and the government's management of the early outbreaks became a point of political contention. Yet my analysis of media content shows that neither major party denied the seriousness of the problem and that their messaging reinforced the need for citizens to take action to reduce the spread of the disease. This should generate a setting in which the public would polarize in their evaluations of how the government

has managed the pandemic but yet should not polarize about the seriousness of COVID-19 like those in countries where elite signals were divided. Public opinion data from the election is consistent with this argument. This situation allows us to explore how public opinion works in the absence of polarizing elite messaging and to contrast the situation in South Korea with the polarization that occurred in the United States and elsewhere. Without polarized discussion of the pandemic by partisan and media elites, the data presented here suggests that public polarization would have been reduced.

## **2. Do Elites Cause the Public to Polarize?**

In democratic societies, polarization in the electorate deepens in tandem with elite polarization. The question is whether the public leads or follows elite messaging. Reflecting on this perspective, some studies argue that polarization in public opinion has its roots in the public itself. They locate, as the drivers of polarization, contrasts in sociocultural characteristics, differing moral visions and value systems, differences in social groups, and opposing issue preferences and ideologies (Bishop 2004; Edsall 2003; Evans 1997; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Himmelfarb 2001; Mattingly 2000). These differences create political entrepreneurs to sharpen their message to appeal to an increasingly polarized society.

Yet, as differences in these individual attributes often failed to be direct predictors of political polarization (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), other studies argue that polarization is led by polarizing elite cues communicated through media coverage (Carmichael and Brulle 2017; Merkley and Stecula 2021; Tesler 2018). Citizens are highly responsive to cues from party elites in forming their opinions about political matters (Berinsky 2007; Lenz 2012). Citizens rely on elite cues as information shortcuts or heuristics for political judgments (Kam 2005; Mondak 1993) or take elite cues to reaffirm their partisan identities by expressing and rationalizing the

attitudes cued to be consistent with their party's position, and in this case, citizens rather engage in effortful motivated reasoning (Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2020; Petersen et al. 2013). As a result, citizens are likely to hold attitudes consistent with those of their preferred party elites while being distant from those of opposing elites (Levendusky 2009). Citizens use media coverage to gauge the stance of their preferred party elites, especially on new or complex issues, and form their opinions based on elite cues (Zaller 1992). Thus, conflicting elite cues communicated through media to the public can cause polarization among citizens who tend to be receptive only to the messages of co-partisan elites (Kahan 2015). Once citizens form clear initial opinions based on elite messages, they seldom update their opinion with subsequent factual information, making it hard to ease the polarization that once formed (Druckman and Bolsen 2011).

Elite-led partisan polarization can occur on highly salient public issues even when a scientific consensus exists. For example, considerable evidence shows that Americans' opinions on global warming are highly divided along party lines, pointing out polarizing elite signals that shape media coverage as a major factor for public polarization (Carmichael and Brulle 2017; Merkley and Stecula 2021; Tesler 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic can be another case where elite cues play an important role in polarizing public opinion as well. Unlike the medical community, which spoke with one voice on the risk of COVID-19 from the beginning of the outbreak and insisted on the need for preventive measures such as face masks and vaccines, politicians, including leaders in many countries, misled public opinion in different directions with conflicting messages about COVID-19's seriousness depending on their party's stance. Therefore, as with the threat of global warming, public perceptions of COVID-19's seriousness are also likely to have polarized along party lines insofar as partisan elite signals were divided.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there have been myriad studies conducted analyzing how the crisis affected public opinions around the world. One common question is how the public evaluated government performance in managing the crisis. Leaders who managed it well received a bump in their popularity (Bol et al. 2021; Yam et al. 2020). But as the public held governments accountable for their management of the crisis, a salient question was whether the public would evaluate government performance consistently. There is consistent evidence that the public perceives government performance in a partisan-tinged way, such that government co-partisans tend to see outcomes more positively than opposition supporters (Anderson 2007). And despite the widespread coverage of trends regarding cases and deaths, the same has happened with COVID-19 as well in many countries. Partisan differences were widely observed in public evaluations of government responses to COVID-19. Studies conducted in the US (at both the national and state level), the UK, Italy, Germany, and Mexico show that supporters of governing parties are predisposed to more positively evaluate government performance in addressing the public health crisis than opposition supporters (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Aruguete et al. 2021; Druckman et al. 2021; VanDusky-Allen, Utych, and Catalano 2021; Vlandas and Klymak 2021).

More troubling, however, was that studies also found that partisan differences were not just limited to evaluations of government performance. Instead, in many places, the public also disagreed in their perceptions of COVID-19 severity and in their willingness to comply with health recommendations and government policies targeted at reducing disease transmission. A great deal of studies in the US shows that Republican supporters were less aware of COVID-19 risk and also less likely to voluntarily comply with the government's COVID-19 prevention policies than Democrats (Allcott et al. 2020; Camobreco and He 2022; Gadarian, Goodman, and

Pepinsky 2021). Further, Republicans were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19 than Democrats (Enders et al. 2020; Havey 2020). But this pattern was not limited to the US. In the UK, like their Republican counterparts in the US, Conservative supporters tended to perceive the COVID-19 threat less seriously than Labour supporters and thereby complied less with the government's prevention measures (Vlandas and Klymak 2021). Likewise, in Mexico and Brazil, public perceptions of health risks from COVID-19 systematically varied depending on partisanship (Aruguete et al. 2021; Calvo and Ventura 2021). In all these places, citizens tended to align their perceptions of COVID-19 severity with the stance of their preferred political party.

These studies suggest that polarization among political elites significantly caused public polarization even on a life-threatening emergency issue such as the pandemic. In the US, Republican politicians, including President Donald Trump, had publicly expressed their skepticism about COVID-19 severity, while Democrat elites discussed the COVID-19 crisis more frequently and emphasized its threat to public health (Green et al. 2020). The polarization in elite discussion of the pandemic exactly corresponds with a partisan divide in Americans' perceptions of COVID-19. Gadarian et al. (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic issue has been handled very politically in the US, and thus party identification and ideology affected Americans' perceptions of COVID-19 severity. The relation between elite polarization and citizens' divergent attitudes toward the pandemic is also observed in many European countries. In the UK, prime minister Boris Johnson from the Conservative Party maintained lax attitudes toward the pandemic, even saying that it is a "patriotic duty" to visit the nation's reopened pubs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Owen. 2020. "Boris Johnson Wants Britain to Go to the Pub – and Forget about the 65,700 Dead." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/25/boris-johnson-britain-pub-dead-government-coronavirus> (April 7, 2020).

And a recent empirical study shows that supporters of the ruling Conservative Party perceived COVID-19 as less threatening than supporters of the opposition Labour Party and left home more after the national lockdown was announced (Vlandas and Klymak 2021). In Italy, the far-right opposition League Party leader Matteo Salvini and other opposition parliamentary members occupied the Italian parliament to protest the lockdown measure implemented by the government<sup>2</sup>, and thereafter violent right-wing demonstrations against the national lockdown occurred in several Italian cities.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in Spain, supporters of the far-right Vox Party protested against a partial lockdown on Madrid imposed by the left-wing national government, in line with the stance of the Vox Party, arguing that the government's measure is illegal and excessive.<sup>4</sup>

While these linkages may be driven by elite messaging, they might also be driven by media coverage along ideological lines. In the US, not only Republican elites but also conservative media outlets, such as Fox News, repeatedly downplayed the risk of coronavirus in the early stage of the pandemic. Empirical studies find evidence that viewing conservative or Republican-leaning media outlets, in particular Fox News leads to lower levels of concern over the virus and less compliance with social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US (Clinton et al. 2021; Gollwitzer et al. 2020; Simonov et al. 2020). These findings suggest that partisan perspectives are propagated through partisan media, deepening polarization in public attitudes toward the pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Hannah. 2020. "Salvini Occupies Italian Parliament in Lockdown Protest." *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-salvini-coronavirus-occupies-italian-parliament-in-lockdown-protest/> (April 7, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> BBC. 2020. "Covid: Protests Take Place across Italy over Anti-virus Measures." *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54701042> (April 7, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Rodriguez, Elena, and Guillermo Martinez. 2020. "Waving Spanish flags, Vox Supporters Protest against Madrid Lockdown." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-spainprotests-idUSKBN26X1K7> (April 7, 2020).



If elite polarization is driving mass polarization, then we should see the opposite dynamic in countries where there is elite consensus. Suggestive evidence for this possibility is provided by Merkley et al. (2020), who show that public attitudes toward the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada were not polarized along party lines because there was “cross-partisan consensus” among Canadian political elites on important issues related to the pandemic, such as its seriousness and the necessity of social distancing. Yet while suggestive, they only hypothesize about the existence of the elite consensus but do not directly show it existed through systematic analysis of media coverage or elite statements. However, identifying cases where there was no elite divergence allows us to test what may have occurred if elites had not polarized in the United States or elsewhere.

Taken together, these studies suggest that whether partisan loyalties shape public attitudes toward the pandemic and government responses to the crisis varies depending on whether the issue is politically charged or not. This is consistent with the larger literature arguing that polarization has its origins in elite and media messaging. Yet, most of the studies looking at elite and public polarization over the seriousness of COVID-19 have focused on countries where elites diverged and in particular on countries where governing parties and their associated media downplayed the seriousness of the disease to minimize their responsibilities and needed policy responses. Less attention has been paid to countries where elites differed in their evaluations of the efficacy of attempted policies but agreed in their assessments of its seriousness and the appropriate policy responses. Finding differences in public evaluations of COVID-19 risks and policies would further illustrate the role that elite actors played in driving polarization in countries where this consensus did not emerge. South Korea is, I argue, such a case.

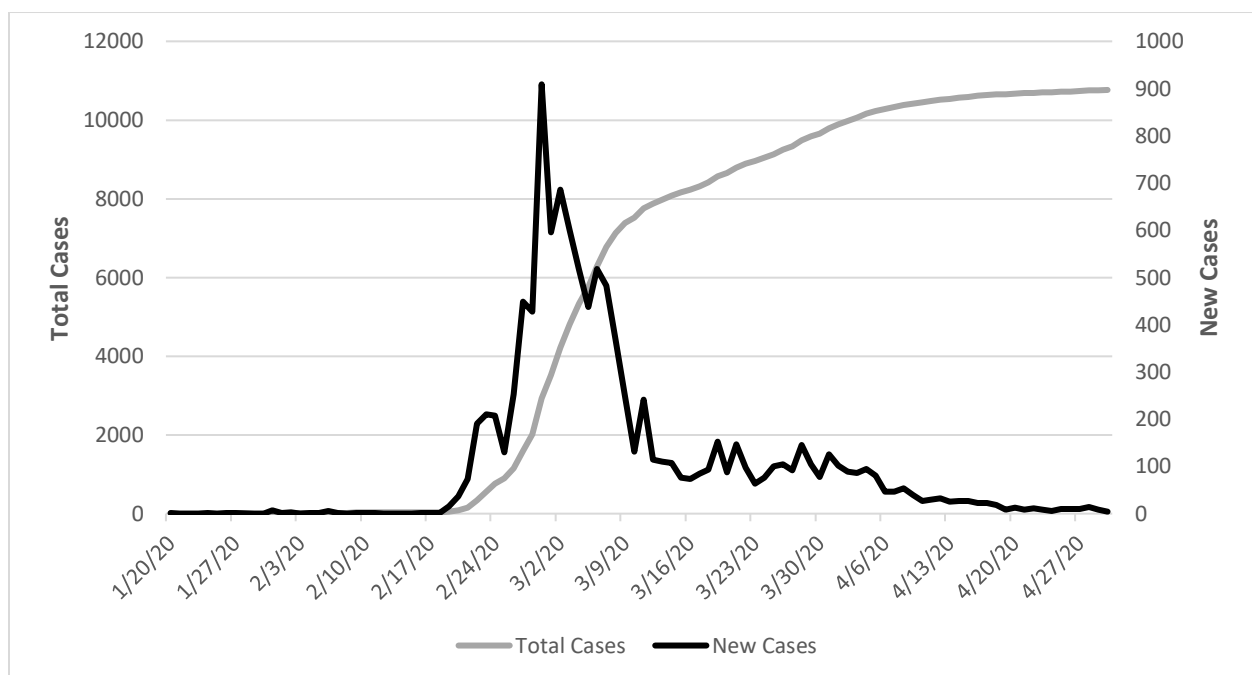
### 3. The COVID-19 Crisis and Government Responses in South Korea

The first COVID-19 case in South Korea was reported on January 20, 2020. In the earliest stage of the pandemic, confirmed cases were limited to travelers from overseas or those who had close contact with confirmed cases. The average of newly confirmed cases was about 1.1 per day from January 20 to February 17. However, an outbreak at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu that resulted in 8,000+ confirmed cases in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province caused the government to declare a severe crisis. By the end of February 2020, South Korea was ranked second after China in the world for confirmed cases, with the number of newly confirmed cases per day hitting a peak at 909 on February 29.

Amid widespread fears about infection among citizens, the left-leaning Moon Jae-in government responded to the pandemic crisis by introducing the “K-Quarantine” organized around ‘3Ts’—Testing, Tracing, and Treatment—a strategy that “consists of robust laboratory diagnostic testing to confirm positive cases, rigorous contact tracing to prevent further spread, and treating those infected at the earliest possible stage” (Government of the Republic of Korea 2020, 35–77). In order to enhance the efficiency of mass testing, South Korea introduced the world’s first coronavirus drive-through testing station along with walk-through screening stations. To improve the accuracy of epidemiological investigation, when needed, credit card transaction records, CCTV footage, mobile phone GPS data, and other advanced technologies were utilized to trace the paths of confirmed cases. The information found during epidemiological investigations was released anonymously to the public, allowing people to check if they had come across infected people and get tested if necessary. More importantly, the government covered the cost of COVID-19 testing and treatment for those who meet the relevant criteria, encouraging the public to get tested for COVID-19.

With the government prioritizing early detection of the virus, coronavirus cases dropped sharply in South Korea in April 2020, in contrast with the worldwide situation at the time (Figure 1). The systematic measures taken swiftly by the government had been judged globally successful in limiting the spread of the virus without using the drastic measure of locking down entire cities.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: COVID-19 Situation in South Korea from January to April 2020**



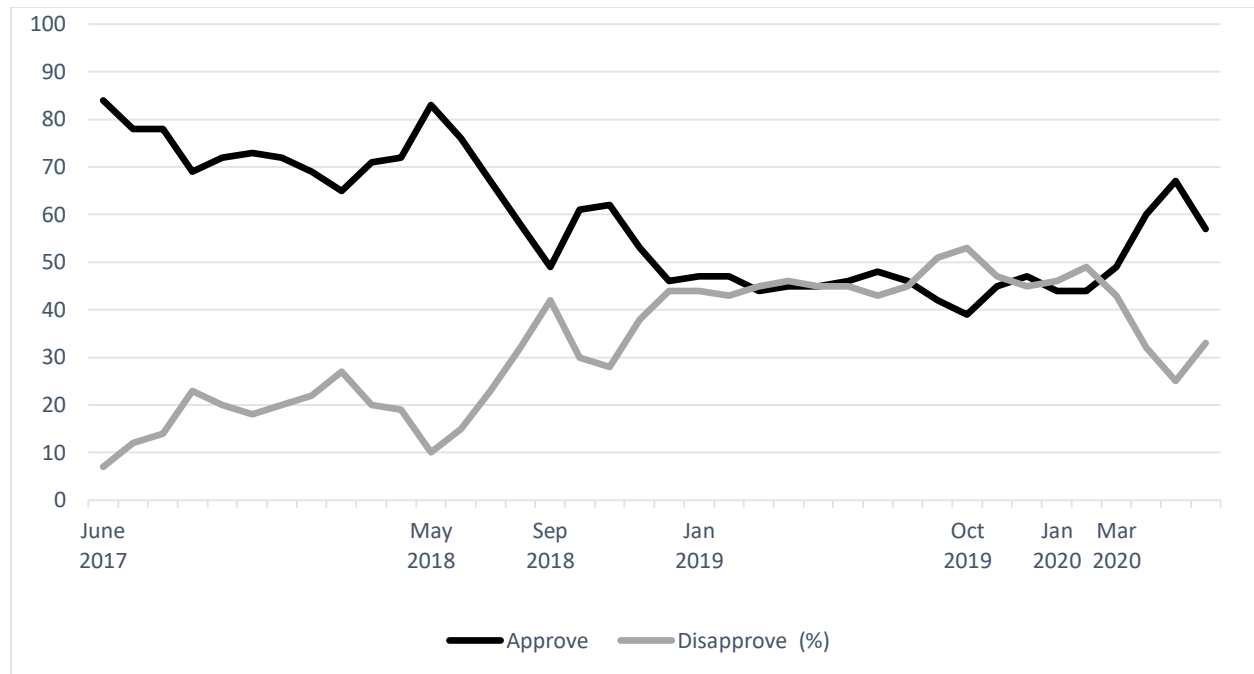
\*Note: The data stops in April 2020 when the 21<sup>st</sup> National Assembly election was held. The data used for the graph is from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (<http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/>).

The electoral outcomes of the 2020 National Assembly election seem to suggest that the government’s response to COVID-19 was evaluated favorably by the public at the time as well. The ruling Democratic Party of Korea won a total of 180 seats, which is nearly two-thirds of the

<sup>5</sup> Dudden, Alexis, and Andrew Marks. 2020. “South Korea Took Rapid, Intrusive Measures against Covid-19 – and They Worked.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/20/south-korea-rapid-intrusive-measures-covid-19> (November 2, 2021).

300-member legislature, while the leading opposition United Future Party only won 103 seats. As the Moon government’s response to COVID-19 was positively received by the public, President Moon Jae-in’s approval ratings started rebounding as the crisis unfolded (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: President Moon Jae-in’s Approval Ratings from June 2017 to June 2020**



\*Note: The data source is Gallup Korea (<https://www.gallup.co.kr/>).

Government approval rose to 49 percent and became again higher than disapproval in mid-March 2020, giving the president a nearly 30-percentage point favorability rating right before the 21<sup>st</sup> National Assembly Election on April 15, 2020 (see Appendix 1 for further explanations of the approval trend). The reasons for positive evaluation of President Moon’s performance were asked, and 44 percent of positive evaluators answered “response to the COVID-19 crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Corresponding to the electoral outcomes that the ruling party won a

<sup>6</sup> Gallup Korea. 2020. “GallupKoreaDailyOpinion\_392(20200313).” *Gallup Korea*. <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1091> (November 2, 2021).

landslide victory, some studies show that positive evaluations of government responses to COVID-19 caused South Korean voters to cast a vote for the ruling party (Park 2020; Shin 2020). Further, many studies demonstrate that positive assessments of government performance in handling COVID-19 increased citizens' vaccination intentions (Hwang, Gil, and Choi 2021; Kim, Chang, and Jang 2021), trust in government, satisfaction with the democratic system, and national pride (Gil 2021; Oh 2021; Shin and Park 2022), and even led to support for the state role expansion (S. Park and Shin 2021).

Yet, the experience of other countries raises the possibility that South Koreans' views of the pandemic, while positive on average, are polarized within society along party lines. South Korea's party system is anchored by connections to two main political party blocks that reflect regional cleavages and political dynasties (Choi 1995; Lee and Brunn 1996; Park 1993).<sup>7</sup> These partisan loyalties end up polarizing public opinion about the state of the economy (Kim 2016; Lee 2017; Lee and Singer 2022) and about policy priorities (Jung 2016; Kim 2012; Lee 2011). Helping drive polarization is a media environment in which not only cable news channels but also public TV stations and major newspapers systematically align themselves with different partisan camps depending on political or ideological orientation (Han 2018; Lee 2008; Lee and Lee 2016; Park and Kim 2016). Partisan media outlets take a very different tone of argument on varied public issues across politics, foreign policy, economy, society, and culture, depending on political slants (Hyunju Choi 2010; M. Kam and Song 2012; Yungwook Kim, Ham, and Kim 2017; J. Park 2016). Importantly, according to the Korea Press Foundation's survey (2021), the viewership or readership of conservative media includes more conservatives than liberals, while

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<sup>7</sup> Since the two major conservative and liberal parties have constantly renamed and reorganized with countless merges and splits, they cannot be named by one exact party name. Currently, the Democratic Party of Korea is the major liberal party based in the Honam region, and the People Power Party is the major conservative party based in the Yeongnam region.

the opposite is true for liberal media. This result indicates that citizens indeed seek sources of news that are perceived as more favorable to their political orientation, and partisan media outlets cater to people of different ideologies.

This creates a scenario where public evaluations of COVID-19 outcomes have the possibility to have polarized along partisan lines. Recent work on the 2020 Korean election suggests that many citizens tend to make a vote choice depending on political orientation regardless of how they evaluated government responses to COVID-19 (Gil and Kang 2020; S. Park 2020). More importantly, opposition-party supporters and ruling-party supporters may have evaluated the pandemic differently. Bae (2021) shows that people who have a low affinity for the president are less likely to recognize the country's successful response to COVID-19 as the president's achievement. For the ruling party supporters, in contrast, positive evaluations of government performance in addressing COVID-19 led to higher vaccination acceptance, trust in government, satisfaction with the political system, and national pride than for opposition supporters (Gil 2021; Hwang, Gil, and Choi 2021; B. B. Park and Shin 2021).

Yet, these studies might have been overstating the differences within the electorate. After all, it might be difficult for people to ignore or justify government performance during a national crisis such as the global pandemic. During crisis situations, information is easy for people to obtain since there will be extensive media coverage surrounding the events, and people are likely to pay greater attention to information due to issue salience.

Paradoxically, however, the salience of information during crises suggests that public perceptions of crisis can be biased by the very information people obtain to grasp a situation. If biased information is disseminated through partisan media, differential exposure to it could result in polarization of public opinion even on a salient issue such as COVID-19. The literature on the

influence of partisan media in the US, the UK, and other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how this has occurred. If the partisan media of South Korea polarized in a similar manner, then we may expect the public to polarize as well. If they did not, then we would see less public polarization on the issue. Documenting these linkages and their implications is the goal of this study.

#### **4. Media Content Analysis**

In this section, I analyze the newspaper articles of two prominent conservative and progressive media outlets about the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, I attempt to verify whether South Korean media has actually polarized on the COVID-19 issues including government responses to the crisis and the seriousness of the disease in accordance with political slants.

##### **4.1 Data and Methods**

I examine the attitudes of major news media outlets, DongA and Hankyoreh, toward the COVID-19 issues. DongA is a major conservative newspaper and Hankyoreh is a major liberal newspaper which was a pro-government at the time in South Korea. The first case of COVID-19 in South Korea was reported on January 20, 2020, and the 21<sup>st</sup> National Assembly Election was held on April 15, 2020. Therefore, I have collected all the articles of DongA and Hankyoreh newspapers including the keyword “COVID-19,” released from January 21 to April 14, 2020. The total number of collected newspaper articles is 11,271, which includes 6,746 from DongA and 4,525 from Hankyoreh.

I conduct automated media content analysis using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (hereafter LDA) model developed by Blei et al. (2003). LDA is an unsupervised machine learning technique that infers topics of text documents by clustering words with similar

meanings using contextual clues (Steyvers and Griffiths 2007; Syed and Weber 2018). The LDA model classifies topics by learning the use frequency of words existing in documents and then extracts latent topics of documents according to the ratio of topics within each document (Griffiths and Steyvers 2004).

I determine the optimal number of topics for each newspaper with hyperparameter tuning by comparing models' performance metrics (Yang and Shami 2020). In making the LDA model with Gibbs sampling using the R package *topicmodels*, I set the number of topics (k) as 17 topics for DongA and 18 topics for Hankyoreh newspapers following the results of hyperparameter tuning (see Appendix 3 for hyperparameter tuning results).

Using this text mining method, I explore whether there is any substantial divergence of opinion between the two media outlets espousing opposite political and ideological orientations. If there was a difference in frequently used words and topics across outlets within the overarching common theme of the COVID-19 pandemic, it might have influenced citizens' perceptions of the situation and their evaluations of government responses to the crisis, as citizens rely on media to obtain pandemic-related information. I analyze newspaper partisanship by comparing the frequently used major words and the main topics that appear in the articles of each media outlet.

## **4.2 Data Analysis and Findings**

Prior to topic modeling analysis, I conducted a word frequency analysis to see if there was a difference in the most frequently used words in newspaper articles between the two media outlets. More similarities are found than differences, as the top 20 major words are identical for both newspapers. Nonetheless, there are noticeable differences between the newspapers in the order of word frequency, thereby leaving some room for indirect inference about what aspects of



the pandemic situation each newspaper wanted to emphasize more (see Appendix 2 for the comparison of word frequency analysis).

**Table 1: Comparison of Topic Modeling Results**

Topic	DongA		Hankyoreh		Difference	Average
	N	%	N	%		
The Shincheonji Crisis	833	12.35	395	8.73	-3.62	10.54
Community Transmission	352	5.22	501	11.07	5.85	8.15
Restrictions on Entering a Country	561	8.32	348	7.69	-0.63	8.01
Emergency Coronavirus Relief Funds	365	5.41	376	8.31	2.90	6.86
The Global Surge in Confirmed COVID-19 Case	539	7.99	210	4.64	-3.35	6.32
The 21 <sup>st</sup> National Assembly Election	431	6.39	253	5.59	-0.80	5.99
Impact on Culture, Entertainment and Sports	394	5.84	265	5.86	0.02	5.85
Support for the Recovery of COVID-19 from All Walks of Life	407	6.03	225	4.97	-1.06	5.50
The Government's Regular Briefing on COVID-19	450	6.67	184	4.07	-2.60	5.37
Contraction of the Global Economy by COVID-19	302	4.48	273	6.03	1.55	5.26
Information on COVID-19	366	5.43	199	4.40	-1.03	4.92
Domestic Industry Damage by COVID-19	319	4.73	227	5.02	0.29	4.88
Violations of Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Measures	313	4.64	214	4.73	0.09	4.69
Everyday News in the COVID-19 Era	339	5.03	149	3.29	-1.74	4.16
Impact on Education	245	3.63	153	3.38	-0.25	3.51
Criticisms on the Opposition, Conservative Groups, and Conservative Press*			217	4.80		
President Moon Jae-in's Performance*			169	3.73		
Social Distancing*			167	3.69		
New Technologies for the COVID-19 Era*	267	3.96				
The Mask Shortage*	263	3.90				
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,746</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>4,525</b>	<b>100</b>		

\*Note: The topics marked with asterisks are those that appear in only one media but not in another media.

As in the preceding word frequency analysis, more similarities are found than differences in topics that articles of both newspapers comprise since both media outlets dealt similarly with important domestic and foreign issues that occurred in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Appendix 4 for topic modeling results). However, there are particular topics that only appear in one media but not in another media, and vice versa. Moreover, even if the same topics are commonly extracted from both newspapers, meaningful differences can be observed depending on how much they deal with the topic more or how much they cover the topic less. Table 1 demonstrates these commonalities and differences between the two media outlets in more detail.

First, the controversies surrounding the government's initial responses to COVID-19 were observed through asterisked topics appearing in only one media but not in the other, demonstrating two media outlets' distinct political orientation and whether pro-governmental or not. The different elite messages are reflected in the partisan newspapers, with the pro-government Hankyoreh talking more about "Social Distancing" and the opposition-sympathetic DongA covering "the Mask Shortage" more. In the early stage of the pandemic, face masks were not sufficiently supplied in the country, such that people lined up at pharmacies early in the morning to buy masks amid the Shincheonji crisis and the rapid local spread. The mask shortage caused a great deal of confusion and infection control was at risk by the supply shortage of this essential protective equipment. In this situation, the government and the ruling party politicians changed their stances, sending out the message that "wearing masks is not mandatory to be safe from the virus," and the mask shortage is spreading "unnecessary concerns" among citizens.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the government limited or prohibited activities with a high risk of spreading COVID-19

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<sup>8</sup> Kang, Tae-jun. 2020. "South Korea Grapples with Mask Shortage Amid COVID-19 Outbreak." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/south-korea-grapples-with-mask-shortage-amid-covid-19-outbreak> (May 5, 2022).

and continuously promoted social distancing and raised public awareness. The leading opposition party, in contrast, criticized the government's changing stance about mask usage advising people not to wear a mask if they are healthy due to a lack of mask supply, which is a "makeshift policy" that caused "chaos" among people, calling the mask shortage a "disaster" caused by the clumsy government operation.<sup>9</sup>

Advocating the government's stance emphasizing social distancing in a shortage of face masks, the Hankyoreh newspaper wrote more articles criticizing institutions and organizations that were not cooperative with or dispraised the government's infectious disease prevention and control measures and efforts, which constitutes the topic "Criticisms on the Opposition, Conservative Groups, and Conservative Press." They criticized conservative groups and a specific religious organization that violated the social distancing policy and led large-scale anti-government rallies, and also condemned the leading opposition party and conservative media outlets that criticized the government's inadequate responses to the pandemic such as the mask shortage, arguing that they were instigating unnecessary crisis and fear among citizens.

On the contrary, the Hankyoreh newspaper highlighted and personalized President Moon Jae-in's strong performance in handling the pandemic, which is the topic "President Moon Jae-in's Performance." As citizens continued to cooperate with the government's measures, the spread of the disease gradually came under control, in contrast to the global pandemic situation. As South Korea's response to COVID-19 was evaluated as effective and successful by foreign countries, President Moon Jae-in held meetings with leaders of various countries, including President Trump of the US, and performed diplomatic activities to share South Korea's know-

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<sup>9</sup> Yoo, Byung-hoon, 2020. "Criticism over the Government's Changing Stance on the Mask Usage." *The Chosunilbo*.  
[https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2020/03/05/2020030502331.html?utm\\_source=naver&utm\\_medium=original&utm\\_campaign=news](https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/03/05/2020030502331.html?utm_source=naver&utm_medium=original&utm_campaign=news) (May 10, 2020).

how in handling the pandemic. This topic is also composed of articles about President Moon Jae-in actively supporting the relevant authorities and institutions in addressing COVID-19.

Hankyoreh, a pro-government media, also emphasized the government's distribution of relief funds more than DongA. With COVID-19 rapidly spreading in the country, the government had provided emergency disaster relief funds to stabilize the livelihoods of people suffering from the pandemic, such as small businesses or freelancers, and to boost consumption shrunk by COVID-19 right before the 2020 legislative elections. As one more topic was extracted, the proportion of articles of Hankyoreh's each topic is mostly smaller or slightly higher than DongA. In this condition, Hankyoreh covered the topic of "Emergency Coronavirus Relief Funds" by a whopping nearly 3 percentage point more than DongA.

The media content analysis shows that DongA and Hankyoreh revealed their political slants by their selective coverages of specific issues, depending on whether those issues are favorable or unfavorable to the government. This differential focus on particular issues expresses newspaper partisanship. More importantly, this partisan media can influence public evaluations of government performance. Considering that ruling party supporters are likely to follow the media which is pro-government while opposition supporters are likely to rely on the media which is on the opposite side, partisan media may have biased and strengthened partisans' attitudes toward government performance even during the national crisis.

Unlike in other countries, however, both media outlets emphasized the seriousness of the virus with both covering the same topics regarding the spread of COVID-19 at home and abroad, and while they stressed different methods for fighting the disease, both agreed that some kind of behavioral change was necessary for the greater good. These same but different attitudes of the two media outlets on COVID-19 are consistent with elite messages. Elites from both sides

agreed that COVID-19 is a substantial matter of public health, and thus effective infectious disease prevention and control measures are necessary for curbing the spread of the virus in the country. Yet, as seen from the aforementioned mask shortage, elites disagreed on whether government responses to COVID-19 are adequate and efficient for combatting the virus. While the ruling party elites supported the government's measures and approved of government performance in handling the crisis, opposition politicians criticized government responses to COVID-19 as inadequate and urged upon the government to employ more efficient disease mitigation measures.

The media outlets on both sides showed a difference of opinion over government responses to the pandemic, but they both acknowledged COVID-19 as a serious threat to public health and agreed on the need for prevention and control measures. In other words, although government performance in handling COVID-19 was politicized, COVID-19 severity was not partisan-framed in South Korean media. This diverges from other countries where not only government responses to the disease but also the disease itself were highly politicized, causing public polarization in both evaluations of government performance and perceptions of the virus.

Inasmuch as the public follows these cues, elite and media messaging have created a scenario where South Korean citizens would polarize strongly about the appropriateness of the government's tactics and its performance in fighting COVID-19 but would not disagree about the necessity of taking steps to do and the seriousness of the threat. I now turn to public opinion data to see if this is what occurred.

## **5. Survey Data Analysis**

### **5.1 Data and Methods**

I use survey data of voter opinion regarding the 21<sup>st</sup> National Assembly election in 2020 conducted in the midst of the pandemic. The survey was conducted from April 22 to April 28, 2020, by the Korean Social Science Data Center (KSDC). The data was collected via a self-administered online survey using a structured questionnaire with a nationally representative quota sample of 1,200 men and women aged 18 years or older.<sup>10</sup> The survey questionnaire was structured and included various questions related to citizens' perceptions and opinions regarding the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis, as well as personal experiences caused by the pandemic

The main dependent variables of the study are continuous variables measuring citizens' ratings of government responses to COVID-19 on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly disagree with the opinion and 10 means strongly agree with the opinion. The first dependent variable, *Information*, measures the adequacy of information provided by the government on COVID-19, the second, *Measures* assesses the effectiveness of government measures to prevent and deal with the COVID-19 crisis, the third, *Relief Funds*, evaluates the appropriateness of emergency COVID-19 relief funds provided by the government, the fourth, *Overall*, measures citizens' overall assessment of the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis. The study examines whether citizens' party identification influenced their ratings of government performance in separate models using multiple linear regression.

The study also explores citizens' personal feelings and experiences caused by the pandemic, utilizing four dependent variables. The first, *Seriousness*, measures the perceived severity of COVID-19, the second, *Infection*, assesses the perceived possibility of getting infected with COVID-19, the third, *Damage*, measures the perceived level of damage suffered

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<sup>10</sup> The raw data are available at the Korean Social Science Data Center's website (<https://www.ksdcdb.kr>).

from COVID-19, and the fourth, *Stress*, evaluates the level of stress caused by COVID-19. Seriousness, Infection, and Damage are categorical ordered variables with four response categories, and Stress is a continuous variable measured on a scale of 0 to 10. Hence, ordered logistic regression is used to model outcomes for *Seriousness*, *Infection*, and *Damage*, while multiple linear regression is used for *Stress*.

The primary independent variable in the study is party identification. Party identification is measured with two dummy variables, one representing those who feel closest to the ruling Democratic Party of Korea and the other representing those who feel closest to all other parties, with the baseline being independents. The study also includes previous vote choice as an alternative measure of partisanship, utilizing two dummy variables representing a vote for President Moon Jae-in and a vote for any other candidates in the 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election, with the baseline being election abstainers.

To examine the combined effect of partisanship and its strength, the study generates four dummy variables combining two categories of party identification and partisan strength each.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance of regionalism in shaping political attitudes in South Korea, the study also examines whether the effect of party identification is amplified through regionalization.

Regionalized party identification is also measured with four dummy variables combining two categories of party identification and regional party identification each.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The first represents respondents who feel closest to the ruling party and the strength is “very close,” the second represents those who feel closest to the ruling party and the strength is “somewhat close,” and the third represents those who feel closest to an opposition party and the strength is “somewhat close,” and the fourth represents those who feel closest to an opposition party and the strength is “very close.” The baseline is those who identify with a party but feel “not very close” to it and independents.

<sup>12</sup> The first represents respondents who identify with the ruling party *and* think that the ruling party represents their area of residence, the second represents those who identify with the ruling party but don’t think that the ruling party represents their region, the third represents those who identify with an opposition party, but they don’t think that the party represents their region, and the fourth represents those who identify with an opposition party *and* think that the party represents their area of residence, with the baseline being independents.

I anticipate that individuals who self-identify with the ruling party or who voted for it are more likely to positively evaluate government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic compared to those who self-identify with opposition parties and independents. Furthermore, I posit that as the strength of partisanship increases, the divergence in public attitudes toward the COVID-19 crisis will become more pronounced. Given that regionalism has historically served as a pivotal determinant of political sentiments within the South Korean political landscape, I expect that the impact of party identification on public perceptions will be intensified through regional polarization. However, in light of the convergence of elite and media messaging regarding the seriousness of COVID-19, I anticipate that individuals' feelings and experiences stemming from the pandemic will exhibit lesser division along partisan lines.

## **5.2 Data Analysis and Findings**

To conserve space, I present only the results for the partisanship and regional variables here (see Appendix 6 for full results with controls). There are four model specifications for each dependent variable in Table 2. Each model includes as the main independent variables party identification, previous vote choice, party identification combined with levels of strength, and regional party identification, respectively, plus control variables.

Across all the models in Table 2, what stands out is the consistent differences across partisan lines in how the government's policy efforts are evaluated. Party identification significantly affected public evaluations of government performance in handling COVID-19 in all areas. The ruling party identifiers consistently evaluated government responses to the pandemic more positively than both opposition identifiers and independents. The effect of partisanship was substantially intensified through being combined with its strength and regionalism, and these effects were strong enough to maintain its significance even in full



models where previous vote choice for the president is included together (see Appendix 7 for full models by independent variable).

**Table 2: Evaluations of the COVID-19 Performance in 2020**

[Model #]		Information	Measures	Relief Funds	Overall
[1]	Identification with the Ruling Party	1.615*** (0.186)	1.890*** (0.196)	0.956*** (0.223)	1.968*** (0.201)
	Identification with an Opposition Party	-0.034 (0.190)	-0.213 (0.200)	-0.179 (0.224)	-0.286 (0.205)
[2]	Voted for the President (Moon Jae-in)	1.458*** (0.219)	1.370*** (0.234)	0.703** (0.260)	1.320*** (0.239)
	Voted for an Opposition Candidate	-0.453* (0.229)	-0.883*** (0.245)	-0.821** (0.272)	-1.147*** (0.250)
[3]	Very Close to the Ruling Party	2.196*** (0.315)	2.744*** (0.332)	2.096*** (0.373)	2.915*** (0.341)
	Somewhat Close to the Ruling Party	1.136*** (0.185)	1.596*** (0.195)	0.928*** (0.217)	1.670*** (0.200)
	Somewhat Close to an Opposition Party	-0.272 (0.191)	-0.148 (0.202)	0.182 (0.223)	-0.148 (0.207)
	Very Close to an Opposition Party	-0.796* (0.320)	-0.926** (0.338)	-0.806* (0.374)	-1.054** (0.347)
[4]	Regional Ruling Party Identification	1.662*** (0.245)	1.961*** (0.258)	1.199*** (0.292)	2.105*** (0.263)
	Non-Regional Ruling Party Identification	1.577*** (0.200)	1.835*** (0.210)	0.840*** (0.239)	1.875*** (0.215)
	Non-Regional Opposition Party Identification	0.122 (0.199)	-0.017 (0.210)	-0.050 (0.236)	-0.020 (0.214)
	Regional Opposition Party Identification	-0.471 (0.268)	-0.800** (0.282)	-0.541 (0.317)	-1.078*** (0.288)

Multiple regression analysis, standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001 (two-tailed)

**Table 3: Perceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020**

[Model #]		Seriousness	Infection	Damage	Stress
[1]	Identification with the Ruling Party	-0.491** (0.154)	-0.390* (0.157)	-0.153 (0.154)	-0.251 (0.165)
	Identification with an Opposition Party	-0.132 (0.157)	-0.236 (0.160)	0.060 (0.155)	0.179 (0.169)
[2]	Voted for the President (Moon Jae-in)	-0.545** (0.186)	-0.265 (0.190)	-0.360 (0.184)	-0.329 (0.198)
	Voted for an Opposition Candidate	-0.217 (0.195)	-0.101 (0.199)	0.050 (0.193)	0.097 (0.207)
[3]	Very Close to the Ruling Party	-0.527 (0.271)	-0.148 (0.269)	-0.068 (0.267)	-0.501 (0.278)
	Somewhat Close to the Ruling Party	-0.376* (0.149)	-0.182 (0.155)	-0.207 (0.149)	-0.362* (0.163)
	Somewhat Close to an Opposition Party	-0.054 (0.155)	-0.126 (0.158)	0.072 (0.153)	0.099 (0.169)
	Very Close to an Opposition Party	0.068 (0.268)	0.525 (0.275)	0.015 (0.268)	0.125 (0.283)
[4]	Regional Ruling Party Identification	-0.489* (0.205)	-0.390 (0.210)	-0.240 (0.202)	-0.488* (0.218)
	Non-Regional Ruling Party Identification	-0.488** (0.164)	-0.389* (0.168)	-0.113 (0.165)	-0.131 (0.178)
	Non-Regional Opposition Party Identification	-0.186 (0.165)	-0.253 (0.169)	0.041 (0.164)	0.070 (0.177)
	Regional Opposition Party Identification	0.029 (0.221)	-0.189 (0.223)	0.105 (0.217)	0.476* (0.238)

Ordered logit regression analysis (for *Seriousness*, *Infection*, and *Damage*) and multiple regression analysis (for *Stress*), standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001 (two-tailed)

Then, whether personal vulnerability to COVID-19 systematically differs depending on partisanship is examined in Table 3. The overall results in Table 3 demonstrate that there was little divergence in public attitudes toward the pandemic. Public perceptions of COVID-19 were much less polarized along partisan lines in comparison with their evaluations of the government's effectiveness in handling COVID-19, presented in Table 2. Across all the models,

the effect of party identification was still significant but considerably smaller on individuals' feelings and experiences caused by COVID-19. The influence of political loyalties established through voting for the president was substantially lower as well. Although the ruling party identifiers tend to perceive COVID-19 severity less than opposition identifiers or independents, they did not differ to a great extent from the rest of the electorate in attitudes toward other aspects of the pandemic. Thus, it would be a cautious understanding that the ruling party identifiers' lower perception of seriousness is not from downplaying the risk of the disease but from faith in the government's response, given little partisan differences in other perceptions of COVID-19.

In summary, the analysis of survey data reveals that public polarization primarily manifested in evaluations of government performance, with perceptions of the viral pandemic showing minimal divergence. Importantly, these imbalanced public attitudes align with the messaging of elites and the media, as evidenced by the content analysis of media sources. The findings underscore the potential influence of elite cues conveyed through partisan media platforms, leading to pronounced polarization in public opinion regarding government efforts in combating COVID-19, while overall perceptions of the pandemic remain less divided.

## **6. Conclusion**

The existing literature examining how the COVID-19 pandemic affects public opinion suggests that in many countries, not only citizens' evaluations of government responses to the crisis but also their perceptions of the virus and citizens' experiences with COVID-19 policies are significantly polarized along partisan and ideological lines. Recent studies find that citizens' overall attitudes in many countries are seriously polarized even during a deadly public health

crisis because, not to mention government performance, the virus itself is highly politicized by political elites and partisan media.

By comparison, the media content analysis of the present research shows that in South Korea, while government responses to COVID-19 is politicized, the seriousness of COVID-19 is not so much politicized. Although major media outlets on both sides reported different opinions of government performance, they both emphasized the risk of COVID-19 and agreed on the need for prevention and control measures, which is in line with elite messages. This critical divergence from other countries, where not only government responses to the disease but also the disease itself are highly politicized, leads to another significant difference between these findings and those of previous studies. Namely, the survey data analysis here demonstrates that the more limited polarization in attitudes toward all aspects of COVID-19 extends to the mass public: Although public evaluations of government responses to COVID-19 significantly vary depending on political orientation, public perceptions of COVID-19 itself are substantially less polarized along partisan lines.

Although this analysis of South Korean public opinion corresponds with the findings of the media content analysis, I acknowledge that I cannot substantiate the direct causal effect of elite cues propagated through media on public attitudes toward the COVID-19 pandemic due to the limited scope of data used in this research. However, I argue that the fact that the pattern of lopsided politicization observed in the media content and elite messaging is similarly found in public opinion corroborates the potential for the mass media and political elites to function as the mechanism of causing political polarization in the electorate that is unlikely to occur in a national crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ultimately, the results of this research confirm the influence of partisan perceptions on retrospective evaluations of government performance. At the same time, the research sheds light on the mechanism by which partisan perceptions remain influential on citizens' attitudes even at a critical moment, contributing to the understanding of the role of mass media in political polarization in the electorate. Further, the results suggest an important role of institutions that shape public opinion is to surmount a national crisis. Lastly, the findings are of great significance in showing that public polarization has its origins in elite and media messaging.

If South Korean political elites and media had sent conflicting cues on the risk of COVID-19, South Korean citizens would have had polarizing perceptions of COVID-19 severity depending on partisanship, and thereby levels of compliance with quarantine policies would have been polarized as well. This might actually have led to a fatality rate as high as that of countries in which the risk of the virus was severely politicized by partisan elite and media. Therefore, the "K-Quarantine," South Korea's successful response to COVID-19, would never have been possible. The South Korean case shows the reason that partisan elites should stop political strife and engage in a bipartisan manner for the greater good, at least when it comes to the safety and lives of the people. Fundamentally, it suggests that political elites and media should take a more responsible attitude, conscious of their influence on public opinion.

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